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Grandfather's Last Treat

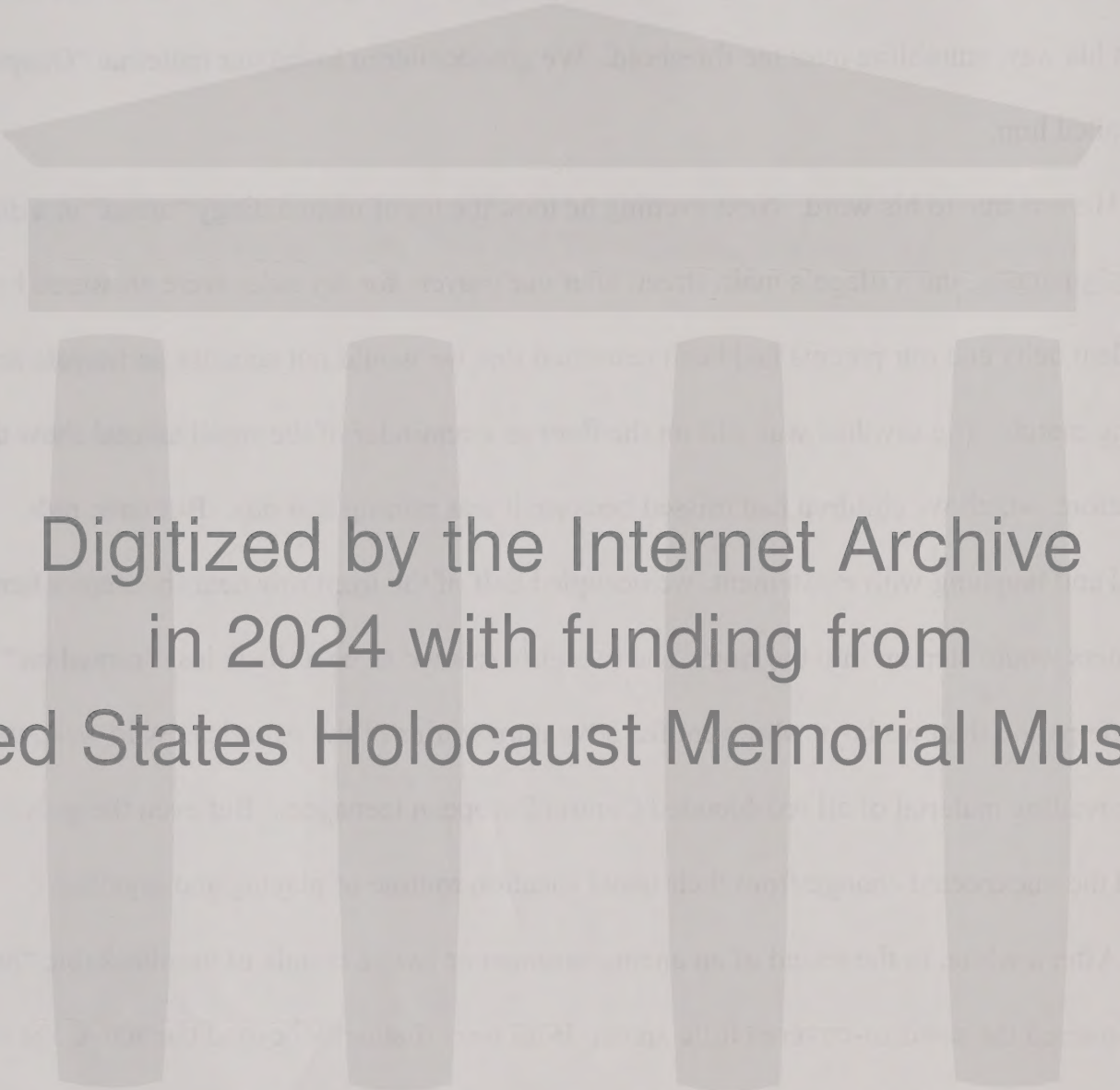
One hot summer afternoon my grandfather announced to us six children, my brother, myself, and our four cousins, that the next day he would take us to a wrestling match. We were spending the summer vacation at my grandparents' place in the country, about twenty miles west of Vienna, Austria, where we lived. We had the run of the house, yard, and garden and swam in a nearby little river. We were four boys and two girls, ranging in age between ten and fourteen, all of us equally euphoric to be light years away from school. Except for rainy days, when playing outside was hardly inviting, at least as far as our parents saw it, we would not have minded romping in the rain. In the tradition of European pedagogy, we were held to a regimen of keeping up with math problems and Latin irregular verbs "so you won't forget what you learned last year." Anybody who was ever compelled to interrupt the ecstasy of summer holidays in rural Austria to sweat over geometry problems and the Gallic Wars knows what the eighth amendment concerning cruel and unusual punishment is all about. Anyway, when my

grandfather invited us to attend a real wrestling match in the backroom of a restaurant our joy was great and our voices of delight were loud and long-lasting.

My grandfather was a jolly, rotund man who managed a tiny grocery store which demanded not much more than sitting and smoking a pipe, waiting for the rare customer, who had lost his way, stumbling over the threshold. We grandchildren loved our maternal “Opapa”, as we called him.

He was true to his word. Next evening he took the lot of us to a dingy “arena” in a diner on Bahnhofstrasse, the Village’s main street, after our prayers for dry skies were answered by a benevolent deity and our parents had been reassured that we would not actually participate in the wrestling match. The sawdust was still on the floor as a reminder of the small animal show the week before, which we children had missed because it was raining that day. But now, red-cheeked and laughing with excitement, we occupied half of the front row near the steps where the fighters would step up into the ring. The two girls seemed to be a shade less “turned on” with anticipation than we boys who were fed adventure stories of the American wild west, the favorite reading material of all red-blooded Central European teenagers. But even the girls enjoyed the unexpected change from their usual vacation routine of playing and giggling.

After a while, to the sound of an anemic trumpet or two, a couple of unmistakable “has beens” entered the sawdust-covered little arena. Both were distinctly beyond the active age of athletes, their bodies flabby, their noses broken, suggesting an early boxing career, and their bearing and expressions bored, tired, and somehow vulgar. An equally archaic announcer who mentioned their cosmopolitan and palpably fake names and their global popularity, which made such an impression on my cousin Helmut that he uttered the Austrian equivalent of “wow”, flamboyantly introduced them in bad German. We children immediately wagered on the



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outcome and the probable winner and shouted approval or disdain, and even Opapa was affected by all the adrenalin. At last, one of the men, red-nosed and perspiring, had his arm raised by the referee, in whom I recognized a retired railroad conductor on the Vienna shuttle train, though I did not share this knowledge. Happily we walked back home, thanking Opapa more than once, and loudly going over the fight. It was the last treat with which my grandfather sweetened our young lives.

Next spring the Nazis came to power, and after most of the family succeeded in fleeing the country, he and one of his daughters were shipped to Poland in a cattle train, where they joined the other six million.

